



Engagement and Negotiation: Exploring a Tertiary Female EFL Teacher's Professional Agency in Her Career Development in P.R. China



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Abstract

Agency is considered as a significant construct in teachers' professional development. Given previous literature offers little empirical evidence regarding how female EFL teachers in China shape and reshape their agency in their career development, the current study attempts to explore a Shanghai tertiary female EFL teacher's agency by examining how she manifested her agency and how she negotiated with the situated context to achieve her roles in her career trajectory. The authors applied qualitative approach, i.e. interviews, classroom observation, artifacts, living graphs, and SNS-based communication to collect the data and thematic analysis to analyze the data, so as to present "thick-description" of the participant's "lived experience". The major findings of this research are: (1) The participant recursively achieved her agency via influences from the past, orientation towards the future, and engagement with the present; (2) Reflection and self-regulation are found to facilitate her agency achievement; (3) The participant's agency was afforded or constrained relatively to her situated context. The study provides insights into possible perspectives of understanding agency and language teachers' professional development.

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1. Introduction

Within current education context, there is much to suggest that teachers play a central and crucial role in educational improvement (Priestley *et al.*, 2015). Due to the dynamic nature and reciprocal relationships with the surrounding society and its changing needs (Borg, 2006; Johnson, 2009), there are emerging themes about teacher education and teacher development over the decades, such as teacher cognition (Johnson, 2006; Borg, 2015), teacher identity (Beijaard *et al.*, 2004; Trent, 2012), teacher autonomy (Benson, 2001; Wang & Zhang,

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2014), teacher reflection (Farrell, 2015; Yaman, 2016), teacher efficacy (Holzberger *et al.*, 2013; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014), and teacher agency (Archer, 2000; Toom, 2017).

Agency, commonly defined as “socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn, 2001:130), is considered to be important for teachers’ professional development, in which they are expected to exert power, take action and effect change. The way how teachers achieve their agency to construct their identity is not a linear, but an ongoing discursive process that is dynamic, complex, negotiated, and contingent (Beijaard *et al.*, 2004).

Language teachers play an important part in their students’ language learning and serve as an impetus for language education and reforms. As Varghese *et al.* (2005: 22) argued, to understand teaching and learning of language, “We need to understand language teachers; and in order to understand language teachers, we need to have a clearer sense of who they are.” Therefore, it is very much necessary and significant for researchers to focus on language teachers so as to better understand the issues of language learning and language teaching.

In China, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has become an indispensable part in its foreign language education, as China has witnessed a far-reaching growth of the importance of English in the country, especially after the implementation of the *Reform and Opening-up* policy in 1978 (Adamson, 2004). In recent years, with the enactment of “*Yidaiyilu*” (The Belt and Road Initiatives) by the Chinese government to “cement its relationship with countries in the region (Djankov & Miner, 2016)”, obviously, English, as a lingua franca, will continue to play a more positive role for China to establish its closer ties with the rest of the world.

The quality of college English education is believed to depend largely upon the overall competence of the EFL teaching force in China (Wang, 2017), because teachers have been positioned as agents of change by the Ministry of Education (MOE). Within the cohort of tertiary EFL teaching force in China, female teachers take up a large percentage. According to a survey, among a sample of 21 universities, there are 944 female EFL teachers, which is 65.97% of 1431 teachers (Jiang, 2011). Apparently the professional development of female teachers deserves more attention from both the society and the academics.

In this study, I attempt to explore female EFL teachers’ professional agency by focusing on a tertiary female EFL teacher in Shanghai to explore her engagement and negotiation in her career development. In the next section, I will present an overview of relevant literature, and I will describe the way how data was collected and analyzed. After that, I will display the findings concerning my research purpose. Finally, I will discuss the findings and draw conclusions concerning the given educational context.

Literature review

This section will present a general overview of studies on relevant topics, such as human agency, language teachers’ professional agency, as well as female teachers’ career development in China, based upon which the research gap is identified and research questions proposed.

Theorizing human agency

There are a multiplicity of perspectives from which agency is defined. For example, agency was addressed as “sociocultural functions” (Giddens, 1984), “self-directedness operating through self-regulatory processes” (Bandura, 1991), and “temporally constructed engagement” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). In recent climate, researchers summarized that agent has “the power to act, to affect matters, to make decisions and choices, and take stances in relation to their identities” (Eteläpelto *et al.*, 2013). With an aim to gain a deeper understanding of human agency, it is highly necessary for us to review the essential properties of it.

Embirmayer and Mische (1998) creatively pinpointed three constitutive elements of human agency: iteration, projectivity, and practical evaluation, which were understood as a configuration of influences from the *past*, orientations towards the *future* and engagement with the *present*.

What has been stressed in the *chordal triad of agency* actually proposes a significant claim that human agency is a dynamic rather than a static situation (Priestley *et al.*, 2012). It is the consistent interaction of the past, the present and future that finally establishes and shapes human agency. The conceptualization of human agency and the delineation of the properties of agency have paved the way for further explorations of the issue.

Mapping language teachers’ professional agency

With an aim to carrying out teaching innovations and enhancing students’ learning, teachers need to maintain and develop their sense of professional agency. Paris & Lung (2008) claimed that teacher agency were grounded in the philosophical, psychological, and social psychological constructs of human agency; Toom *et al.* (2017) defined professional agency as “an integrated concept comprising teacher’s cognitive, motivational and attitudinal

resources as well as skills and abilities to promote and manage learning in multiple professional contexts, especially in the classroom with pupils and in the professional community”. These stances have been crucial to generate the working definition of language teachers’ professional agency in this research study.

In the current study, language teachers’ professional agency has been defined as “language teachers’ beliefs and practices to exert power on the structured educational context and to achieve career development of their own”. This working definition paves the way for further exploration of empirical studies on language teachers’ agency and for guiding the process of research design, data collection and analysis.

Empirical studies that pertain to language teachers’ agency have enhanced the understanding of this issue and have suggested potential studies. [Feryok \(2012\)](#), by exploring an Armenian EFL teacher’s teaching and learning activities, proved that individual agentive actions can contribute to local social activity and that professional development occurs over a life; [Yang \(2013\)](#) demonstrated how language teachers’ agency was practiced in implementing EFL curriculum reform in the Chinese university context; [Kayi-Aydar \(2015\)](#) examined the identity negotiations and agency of three pre-service classroom teachers who received their ESL (English as a Second Language) endorsement at a university in the US; [Trent \(2017\)](#) investigated the experiences of five former English language teachers in Hong Kong during their initial years of full-time teaching to explore the relations among discourse, agency and teacher attrition; [Tao and Gao \(2017\)](#), delineated the interplay of teacher agency and identity commitment in the context of curricular reform. These studies have suggested that researchers are paying attention to the role of language teachers’ professional agency in curriculum implementation, identity negotiations and professional development, etc.

Understanding Female language teachers in China

Schools have widely been described as ‘feminized’ environments, based upon a statistical perspective as far as the workforce is concerned ([Moreau et al., 2007](#)), which has also been discovered in China’s language teaching force ([Wen & Zhang, 2017](#)). Female language teachers have their own uniqueness in the paths of professional development, where they have to negotiate and achieve balance between family life and professional development. However, there is a scarcity of female teachers to achieve a high position in their career. This phenomenon has been described as “glass ceiling effect”, meaning females encounter invisible barriers that prevent them from rising to the upper rungs of career ladder ([Hesse-Biber et al., 2005](#)). Social role theory states that roles and responsibilities in society should be distributed on a gender-discrepancy basis ([Eagly et al., 2007](#)). Accordingly, women are much more expected to be involved in family issues than in career issues. Therefore, the professional well-being of female language teachers is worthy of our attention.

Compared with the kaleidoscope of studies on agency of student teachers ([Turnbull, 2005](#); [Soini et al., 2015](#); [Toom et al., 2017](#)), of novice teachers ([Paris & Lung, 2008](#); [Heikonen et al., 2016](#); [Tesar et al., 2016](#)), and of teacher educators ([Hökkä et al., 2012](#); [Hökkä et al., 2017](#)), there is a dearth of them on female language teachers. Therefore, this study attempts to fill in this gap by exploring how a female language teacher dynamically and discursively enacts her agency in her career development through the constant interplay of her agency and structure.

2. Research Methods

The research setting

This study was conducted at M University (MU), a leading foreign language university in China. MU is located in the city of Shanghai, the economic and educational development of which is considered to be in a leading position of the country. I decided to identify MU as the context of the study because it is possible for me to enter the field, besides, in a foreign language university like MU, there are more female teachers than in other universities.

Participant

Zoe, the participant of the study, is an EFL teacher at MU (Table 1). She is in her mid-career, in which teachers tend to have a stabilized and consolidated understanding of job, professional development and career planning ([Huberman, 1989](#)). I did not invite more individuals to participate in the study as [Creswell \(2013\)](#) suggested that the small number of case studies provides “ample opportunity to identify themes”.

Table 1
The participant's profile

Pseudonym	Degree	Professional title	Age	Research interests
Zoe	PhD	Associate Professor	34	academic writing, language testing

The time I first approached Zoe could be traced back to the year of 2015. As my doctoral supervisor co-worked with Zoe in the teaching program and he invited Zoe to share her doctoral learning experiences in UK with his doctoral students. Based on several follow-up personal view exchanges, I recognized Zoe was a possible subject to dig out how she, as a reprehensive of female English teachers, negotiated with her situated social context to exert her power and engaged herself in her teaching professional development. However, when she was informed by my research orientation, more or less, Zoe expressed her reluctance for the fear that she might be brought to the public view. After I readdressed that I promised to keep her case confidentially, she finally agreed to participate in the study.

Research questions:

To explore the nuanced and intricate dynamics of Zoe's professional agency as a female language teacher, two research questions guided my investigation:

- 1) In what ways does Zoe enact professional agency in the process of career development?
- 2) How does Zoe negotiate with the context to achieve her professional agency?

Data collection

This case study adopted a qualitative research method in order to uncover the complexities of teacher research (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Creswell, 2008). For the purpose of maintaining a holistic understanding of Zoe's teacher agency, I collected multiple data sources (Table 2), which included a living graph drew by Zoe, interviews, classroom observation, SNS-based communication (i.e. WeChat*), artifacts of her teaching plans and journal entries. Using five sets of data collected through diversified methods, we triangulated the data (Cohen *et al.*, 2013).

Table 2
Overview of the data collection period

Data source	Collection period: Oct.2015-Apr.2017	Data
Living graph	Oct.-Nov. 2015	Visual representation
Interviews	Interviews with Zoe (4 times)	Audio-recorded, about 300 min
	Interviews with her colleagues and students (3 times)	Audio-recorded, about 60 min
Observation	Classroom observation (3 times, 6 teaching periods)	Audio-recorded and field notes
SNS-based communication	Across the period	5 emails and 7 WeChat moments
Artifacts	Across the period	Zoe's teaching plans, journal entries

Living graph, as a creative research method adapted from a strategy often used in history teaching (Griffiths *et al.*, 2014), was used in this study to collect the most important turning points and biographical events as seen from the Zoe's own perspectives. A graph was drawn to use a timeline as a horizontal axis and perceived ups and downs during a certain period of time. Zoe was asked to map her personal biographies, perceived highs and lows, career landmarks and barriers and successes using this graphic format. The living graph was then used as the reference for the following interviews and the overall data analysis.

* WeChat is a free messaging and calling app from China with over 0.9 billion users all over the world. Both the researchers and the participant are subscribers to WeChat, which served as the main mode of communication with Zoe for setting up interview meetings.

The interviews in this study followed an open-ended format, with an aim to keep them as open and flexible as possible in registering the participant's perceptions and accounts. Nonetheless, we did make use of an interview guide (Patton, 2002; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) to approach Zoe and her "lived experience" in a detailed and systematic way. Based on the previous claims that agency is the combination of "influences from the past, experiences of the present and orientations towards the future", we generated the following interview guide (Table 3). Interviews with Zoe's colleagues and students were used to correspond and supplement the major findings. All the interviews in this research were conducted in Chinese (the native language of the speakers) to make the conversation at ease and understood.

Table 3
An interview guide of this research

Theme	Example questions
life histories and past teaching experience	Can you tell me why you chose English as your major in the university? What are your beliefs (principles) in EFL teaching?
major events in professional development	What is the most fulfilling thing during years of your career development? What is the most frustrating thing during years of your career development?
future expectations concerning work	Can you share with me your short-term plan for your work? Can you share with me your long-term plan for your work?
females' roles in profession and career development	Do you think female language teachers receive equal treatment in their professional development? How do you try to achieve a balance between your career and family life?

Observational method, which mainly took place in the classroom setting in this study, was used to overcome obstacles caused by biased information about the interviewees or sometimes weak memories of their prior experiences (Lang & Heiss, 1991). We observed Zoe's classroom teaching three times (i.e. 6 teaching periods; 270 mins in total). With Zoe's permission, we audio-recorded the classes. In order to make up with the loss of failing to video-recording, I wrote down the details of each lecture in my field notes, such as the number of the students, how the seats in the classroom were arranged, teacher's and students' body languages, etc. Through these efforts, we intended to capture vivid pictures of Zoe's classroom teaching. Observation in this study helped to supplement other data sources and serves as the lens to examine the participant's practices, especially those related to professional agency.

Alongside with interviews and observations, we also adopted SNS (Social Networking Service) -based communication devices (Kozinets, 2010; Zheng & Xu, 2016) to approach the participant. Both the researchers and Zoe are subscribers to WeChat, which served as the main mode of communication for setting up interview meetings. With Zoe's permission, we collected and analyzed her WeChat moments to gain a more intricate understanding of her agency. As such, I also see our email communications as a supplementary data source. I also collected Zoe's teaching plans and her reflective journals for analysis.

On the one hand, being a PhD student and a teacher of MU respectively, we are relatively easier to gain access to the field and Zoe; on the other hand, there were still limits to the personal level of access when it came to being able to reach out fully to Zoe, because of uneven distributions of power between the researcher(s) and the participant(s), for example, during qualitative interviews (Seidman, 2013). This realization, however, did not stop us from attempting to provide a "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of Zoe's agency in her professional development: we collected multiple data sources and in so doing we manage to explore her agency from different perspectives; during the data collection period, the first author often seek advice from the second author, who is a seasoned language teacher and researcher. To some extent, the exchange of opinions helps avoid research bias and to ensure the objectivity of the data.

Data analysis

Guided by two research questions, I adopted thematic analysis (Merriam, 2009) of the various data in the research study (Figure 1). The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis. The classroom observation were not transcribed verbatim, for the sake of efficiency, I listened to each lesson recording and wrote down major events in each class, with the field notes as supplements and I compared with teaching plans to see the gap between her plans and actions, if there were any. Although there is only one participant in the study, the data collection process gave rise to a multiple and rich data set (as transcribed, 127 pages, A4, single spaced).

I read the transcript through to be familiarized with the content within. Then I divided the transcript into text segments based upon the information delivered. After that, I labeled each segment with a theme such as ‘middle school learning’ and ‘being a novice in tertiary EFL teaching’, etc. After all the segments were coded, I discovered similar codes occurred in labeling the later segments occasionally. In such circumstances, I condensed the similar codes into a broad theme. For example, when talking about her mother helped her cultivate a good habit to learn English, and then her doctoral supervisor being a role model for her, the code that was given for these text segments was ‘learning histories’. Later on, when reporting the experience how she settled down and got adapted to the brand-new teaching career, the code assigned to this text segment was ‘transitional period’. As both these two codes reflected her past experience connected with agency, they were condensed into a broader theme: “iterational dimension”. This process was not linear, but iterative, and involved continually moving back and forth within the entire data set.

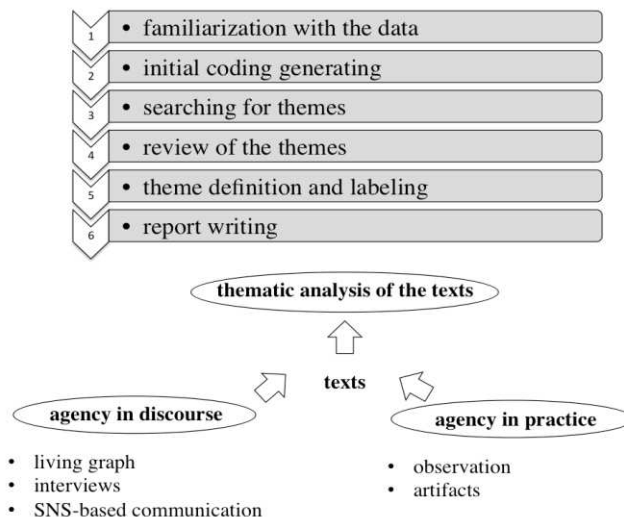


Figure 1. Overview of the data analysis

Ethical considerations

Ethical issues were considered by the researchers, from the first preliminary formulation of the study task to the final report (Taylor, 2001). The anonymity of the participant and the university she’s working was secured; tape-recording the interviews and observations, collecting her WeChat moments and artifacts were all conducted with her permission; the transcripts as well as the final report were sent back to Zoe to ensure member check.

3. Results and Analysis

This study focuses on the professional trajectories of Zoe, an oversea returnee working at MU. Therefore, data display of the research is supplemented with authentic data extracts representing the teacher agency manifested through the participant’s discourse and practices. The extracts below exhibit these patterns, illustrating the exercise of agency from different ways (iteration, projectivity, pratical-evaluation, reflection and self-regulation). They also demonstrate the obstacles and resources affecting the practice of agency. At the end of this section there is a summary of the main findings.

3.1 Zoe's learning and teaching experience

Zoe was first exposed to English at the age of two when her mother consciously taught her English vocabularies. She did admit that this was important because she had formed a regular habit of English language learning and had enough confidence in her language aptitude. Therefore, her experience of learning English at school was not that frustrating as her peers, through her constant endeavors, she finally realized her ambition of studying at a renowned foreign language university.

Zoe received her bachelor's degree in China and earned her master's and doctoral degree in the UK. As an oversea returnee (hai gui), she experienced a stage of unease and confusion when she initiated her teaching career at MU. Fortunately she overcame the obstacles of teaching English through active efforts.

The living graph drawn by Zoe suggested the milestone events in her professional development, which laid foundations for my follow-up exploration during interviews and observation (Figure 2). It can be seen that Zoe's career has so far experienced different stages, including the inception, a short term of confusion, adaptation to the work and gradual advancement. In the next section, I will explore them in a more detailed manner.

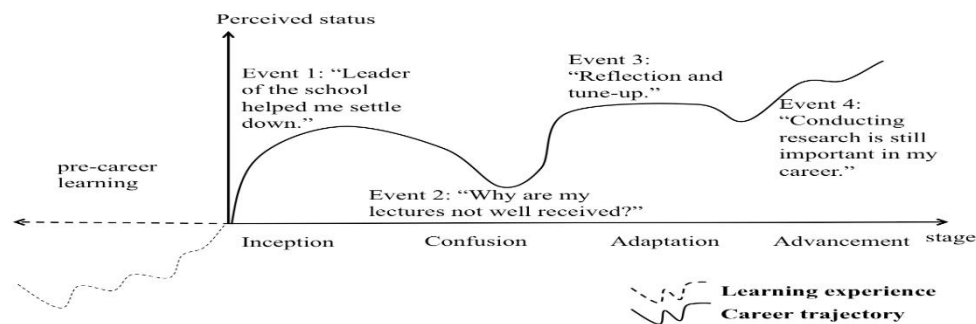


Figure 2. A living graph of Zoe's career

3.2 Zoe's professional agency through engagement

The multiple data sources in the current study suggest that Zoe, on the one hand, actively engages herself in learning, teaching and career development through the influences of her prior-experiences, her strong intention of put her beliefs into practice and her vision of the future. What's more, the data also show that reflection and self-regulation play important roles in overcoming setbacks during her career development (Table 4).

Table 4
An overview of how Zoe manifests her agency through engagement

Dimension	Category	Example
The chordal triad of teacher agency	<i>Iteration</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I started to learn English since two... I really think I got somewhat the language aptitude and I love the language. I had my own plan and rhythm, and they really worked. ...helped me to study abroad with independence and self-control.
	<i>Projectivity</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I need to make some changes in my classroom. Summer vacation is coming, but I am even more occupied. I plan to...
	<i>Practical evaluation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To add students' presentations and debates in her English language classroom for English major students... She always knows what her priority is and is quick in action.
Facilitators of teacher agency	<i>Reflection and self-regulation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I pondered upon this and found it is impossible for me to borrow the western teaching mode to 100%, I need to make some adaptations. I really want to go sleep, but every time I think of my teaching plan to finish, my research article to write, I had to go to my study and sat there for two hours.

Iteration: "My past experience shapes who I am."

In the previous section, I have sketched Zoe's learning histories and major events in her career based upon the living graph she drew. In my interviews with Zoe, she kept on referring to her learning experience and pinpointing that her pre-career learning helped build her confidence and proficiency in English language, which served as the qualifications to be an EFL teacher.

I started to learn English since two, because my mother is an English teacher and she wants me to get exposure to the language as early as possible. It really helps, because I think my early sense (or say, awareness) of the language was aroused at that time...then, after I learn English formally at school, every summer or winter vacation, my mum borrowed the text books to teach me the contents I am going to learn in the next semester...You know, I really think I got somewhat the language aptitude and I love the language (Interview A1).

When Zoe entered senior middle school, both of her parents had to mobilize to another city because of the job transfer. Three years of independent living and studying became an unforgettable experience for her and more importantly, cultivated her sense of autonomy, self-control and perseverance.

Every time I finished school learning, I had supper in my grandparents' home and then I went home alone. The bicycle I rode was heavy but I had to move it upstairs to the room on third floor. After that, I started learning at my desk, usually by 9 pm., I was so sleepy. So I went to bed (but you know, it would be impossible if my parents were at home at that time). I set an alarm clock and got out of bed to learn at 3 am. ... I had my own plan and rhythm, and they really worked...that also helped me to study abroad with independence and self-control (Interview A2).

The above-mentioned episodes from interviews revealed that Zoe's experience in learning English enabled her to be capable and proficient enough to be a tertiary EFL teacher. Her independent learning habit at high school also prepared her to be autonomous and perseverant in achieving her agency at later study and work.

Projectivity: "Vision is an appeal to our better selves".

Apart from the influence of Zoe's past experience, her agency at work was also manifested in her vision and plan toward future. She believed that her students (English majors) should be equipped not only the knowledge and skills of English as a foreign language, but also be open-minded and learn more things about liberal arts. In one of her journal entries, she expressed:

How to help my students be those who are proficient in English language, and be those with broad horizon to better prepared for the future competition? I need to make some changes in my classroom. Perhaps in the next semester, I can make students be more actively involved in searching for cultural information; in debating on a certain topic; in designing group projects... (Journal entry)

Not only did Zoe have visions with regard to teaching, she also showed willingness to enhance her professional development by talking about a "to-do-list" during the interview.

Now that my promotion has been approved, I am supposed to achieve more "academic points" next year. Summer vacation is coming, but I am even more occupied. I plan to finish the journal article which has been left aside for quite a long time, and try to get it published. Then I have to pay more attention to academic conferences both home and abroad. Also our department is compiling a textbook for English major students, in which I am responsible for a unit. During the vacation, I have to finish this task ... You know, a tertiary EFL teacher never has a vacation in real sense. You can never stop (Interview A4).

Through journal entries and interviews, I found that Zoe always had clear visions, both long-term and short-term ones, about her career development which suggests orientation towards the future is also important in achieving one's agency.

Practical evaluation: "In doing we learn."

Both Zoe's past experience and her orientation towards the future have direct influences on her practices. Through the data collection period, I found she was a highly efficient person with strong sense of power to act. In

the previous section, I showed Zoe's intention to bring possible changes in her class to address liberal arts and humanity in English learning. In Table 5, I summarized the content and allocation of time and major foci in one of her lectures (180 min, 4 periods). By adding students' presentations and debates in each unit, Zoe attempted to train students' abilities in solving problems and imbue them with knowledge not only from the textbook but also those related to social phenomenon, liberal arts, etc.

Table 5
Zoe's teaching activities in a unit

Title of the unit: how to speak English in a polite way?		
Teaching activity	Time	Intention
a student's presentation on "politeness in language"	10 min	skills for material searching and public speaking
peer students' question-raising	5 min	awareness of questioning
text analysis	100 min	skills for reading and writing in English
a) teacher's explanation (language points, cultural notes)-55 min		knowledge instruction
b) interactive activities (text comprehension, sentence-making, role playing)-45 min		students' autonomy
exercises analysis	40 min	vocabulary, grammar, translation skills
a debate on "British English and American English, which one do you prefer?"	25 min	comprehensive skills

The interviews with two of Zoe's colleagues and one of her students correspond with what I found.

She is confident and efficient. Every time I assign her a task to accomplish, she always finish it within a short time (Interview B1, with Teacher A, one of the leaders of the department Zoe works for).

Last time we (6 teachers of our school) were invited by the Students' Union to have a debate on "Liberal education in university". Both of us are on the pro-side. Right after we were invited, she began to search arguments, facts and evidences. She always tells us that she is a learning-by-doing person (Interview B2, with Teacher B, one of the colleagues of the department Zoe works for).

Recently, our teacher (Zoe) flipped the English reading classroom. She asked us to learn the lesson by reading the book and watching the video lesson before we come to the class and in class, she facilitated us in discussing, debating and problem-solving. That's quite awesome. (Interview C, with Student A, one of the students in Zoe's English reading class).

It is not difficult to suggest from the above-mentioned excerpts that Zoe is not those who aim high but act in a slow way. Instead, she showed her willingness to learn from practices, either in classroom teaching or in other activities of her daily life.

Reflection and self-regulation: facilitators of agency

So far, the findings of Zoe's agency at work correspond with the chordal triad, yet through the data set, I also find reflection and self-regulation are indispensable for her to achieve agency.

As it was demonstrated in Zoe's living graph, her lessons were not well-received by the students, who were not willing to participate and finish their homework during the inception stage of her career.

At that time, I held the belief that input and output of learning are equally important, and that students should have sufficient output. Therefore, every week I insist they read intensively and they have to write book reports and do the presentation in class. After class, they are also required to submit questions and reflections in our online teaching platform. These are all what I witnessed during my years of learning abroad. But my students found it disastrous for themI pondered upon this and found it is impossible for me to borrow the western teaching mode to 100%, I need

to make some adaptations.....Gradually, they began to accept my teaching mode and be autonomous in learning English (Interview A2).

What is more, as a female teacher, to achieve a balance between career and family is not an easy thing to cope with. Zoe thought there are no secrets or short cut for her; self-regulation helps her to balance both ends.

One of the most difficult things for new mums is the consequences and responsibilities they have to go through in raising and educating a child. I strove to adjust my priorities to accompany my child. There is barely something called my OWN time at home. After my daughter falls sleep, it is already 10 pm. I really want to go sleep, but every time I think of my teaching plan to finish, my research article to write, I had to go to my study and sat there for two hours (Interview A4).

She also mentioned, though the roles of being a career woman and of being a mother were fundamentally different, she enjoyed both, as what she posted on her WeChat moment (Figure 3). For the sake of reader-friendliness, we present the content of WeChat moment in a way of boxed displays (Verdinelli & Scagnoli, 2013) to highlight a specific narrative considered important enough to extract from the text and frame in a box, instead of screenshots.

Original: 两个小时前我在与对方辩友唇枪舌剑, 两小时后我躺在床上把“Twinkle Twinkle Little Star”唱了50遍...人生的落差可以这么大。但是两种角色我都爱, 都是我!

Translation: *Two hours before, I was debating heatedly with the opponents (in an activity organized by the students). Two hours later, I am lying in bed with my daughter, singing the song “twinkle little star” for over 50 times to make her sleep. What a sharp contrast! But I just love both roles, they are all ME!*

Figure 3. Zoe's WeChat post titled “I love both roles!”

Apart from the chordal triad, reflection and self-regulation are therefore found to be facilitators for Zoe to achieve her agency at work. All of these dimensions interplayed and intertwined in shaping and enhancing Zoe's agency and promoting her professional development.

3.3 Zoe's agency through negotiations

As what was reviewed in the earlier section, human agency is deeply rooted in the social context and the practices of agents vary according to the situation they are positioned. The way how Zoe negotiated to achieve her agency was influenced by personal, interpersonal and organizational factors (Table 6).

Table 6
An overview of Zoe's agency through negotiations

Dimension	Category	Example
Personal	<i>Perseverance</i>	• She kept on reading books on research methodologies and the most up-to-date research journals.
	<i>Self-regulative</i>	• She has formed a very independent and autonomous learning habit since her high school days.
	<i>Reflective</i>	• It is through her reflection that she was able to tune-up and to adapt her teaching to students' features.
Interpersonal	<i>Positive</i>	• I should say, she is a role model of mine. As a female, you should not be bound by family affairs.
		• What is more important was his optimistic attitude towards life and his

Organizational	Negative	care and mental support.
	Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • According to his value, I should be the one to look after the family... • I mean, when you are on a relatively high platform, there is an invisible force to push you move forward.
	Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ...especially in a foreign language-oriented university, there is still an invisible force stopping us to climb to the top.

Personal level

As Zoe mentioned in the interview, she has formed a very independent and autonomous learning habit since her high school days. What is more, her agency at work was also shaped by her experience abroad. Since that time, she has gradually shifted herself as a language learner to an independent researcher. She kept on reading books on research methodologies and the most up-to-date journals articles, and had the opportunity to join in her supervisor's research project. Also she was able to take part in international conferences for applied linguistics, all of which influenced her a lot and helped her to establish confidence of becoming a researcher. Both her learning experience and the part-time teaching experience shaped her teaching beliefs and practices. When she attempted to put her teaching beliefs into practice, she did encountered frustrations. It is through her reflection that she was able to tune-up and tailor her teaching to students' features and demands.

Interpersonal level

From Zoe's discourse, it is obvious that two persons influenced her a lot. First of all, her mother is the second-to-none role model for her.

My mother is also an English teacher. She is very strict with herself. When I was small, my mother transferred to another city to pursue her master's degree. But during that time, she wasted no time in cultivating me good learning habit. I should say, she is a role model of mine. As a female, you should not be bound by family affairs. I am lucky that I was born in such a "democratic" family, where females are encouraged to pursue their dreams. (Interview A3).

Another important person in Zoe's life is her PhD supervisor. From time to time, Zoe emphasized what she learned from her supervisor is far more than the rigorous attitude and methods in conducting research; what is more important was his optimistic attitude towards life and his care and mental support giving to her every time she felt demotivated. One of her WeChat moment posts revealed that her supervisor kept in touch with her and never stopped encouraging her even after she moved back to China (Figure 4).

Original: 怀疑人生的时候就甩一封2000字的邮件给导师。几个小时后收到他的回复说会替我好好想一想。然后过了一个礼拜甩给我一封3000字的回复。约好了明天Skype, 但其实我心中早已有了答案。

Translation: Every time I was down and with uncertainty about life, I wrote a 2000 words email to my supervisor. Hours later, I received his reply and he said he would think about that carefully. One week later, he replied me with a 3000 words letter (a crying face). We will talk to each other on Skype tomorrow. Actually, I have already got the answer (as what I usually do, he is always there to be my mental support).

Figure 4. Zoe's WeChat post titled "A letter from my supervisor"

Not all of the people in Zoe's life are so supportive to her career. She shared a story in her reading class that different people turned to react differently regarding the news of her promotion. I sought the answer after the class and got the following answer:

When I told my supervisor that I was promoted and he was, just, hilarious and told me he was going to open a bottle of wine for celebration. But it turns to be an unusually peaceful and calm as for my husband's reaction. It is not difficult to understand, because he is so occupied in every

single day, and according to his value, I should be the one to look after the family. Once I told him that if I could be promoted, I should rest for a while and set for the new promotion (full professor), he felt so surprised that I got such an AMBITIOUS goal (Interview A1)!

It could be frustrating for Zoe that her spouse sometimes did not show interests in her professional growth. It reveals that the social prejudice that women should be responsible for domestic things rather than pursuing her career is deeply rooted and could be a barrier for females to break through. From time to time, she had to confirm herself and attempted to achieve a balance between family life and career pursuit.

Organizational level

Zoe thought the atmosphere of the school she's working for and that of MU in general was favorable. She felt grateful that she could settle down quickly as an oversea returnee, and she could overcome obstacles in her professional development because the school and the university offered a platform for young teachers to show their talents and utter their voices.

Prof. M is really a nice leader of our school. When I was fresh at MU, he kept on encouraging me and helped me settle down. Every time I sent him an email, he would reply it timely. Later I got to know how difficult it is for him, as the leader of our school and has millions of thousands of things to deal with everyday, to reply me with patience and immediacy. And it is not me, he treats every teacher in our school equally. It is like working in a big family (Interview A2).

Zoe believed that with a responsible and considerate leader like this, she felt so encouraging and motivated to do her job well in language teaching and be confident in her career development. What's more, she claimed that most of her colleagues are well-trained and qualified teachers, which, sometimes poses invisible pressure for her to bear.

My colleagues are excellent in teaching and doing research. I mean, when you are on a relatively high platform, there is an invisible force to push you move forward. Peer pressure, I mean. Overall, my colleagues are supportive. Some of us formed a research community. From time to time, we share our latest progress and help to solve confusions each one may have. There are competitions, but I think our cooperation overweighs. We are happy with those who made breakthroughs, either in their teaching, or scholarship (Interview A4).

At large, she felt thankful that the university was fair and flexible to the young teachers like her concerning the criteria for promotion.

I am not exceptional to be promoted within a seemingly short time. Do you know teacher G? We were on board at MU in the same year, but he got promoted even earlier than me because he is so productive in academics. For this, you can see that the length of service is not the sore criteria for promotion. Our university is flexible and it creates us a wonderful platform to pursue excellence in teaching and scholarship. It is pretty awesome (Interview A4)!

Despite the resources and platform that the university provides for the teachers, Zoe showed her concern about the existing assessment mechanisms, which inevitably exerted pressure on her.

Normally speaking, how we are assessed in the university still depends on our quantity of academic output. I have been promoted to have an associate professor title, which requires that I have to earn more than "20 credits" each year. This is really demanding for me. If I fail to reach this, it could be humiliating. So I got to gear myself and turn to the next round of work. The criteria are a double-edged sword. You hate it, because it pushes you so hard; you love it, because it motivates you. That is life (Interview A2)!

In Zoe's discourse, she also expressed a phenomenon in language teachers that it is hard for female teachers to find themselves at the top of the "pyramids".

Although the population of female teachers far exceeds their male counterparts, as far as EFL teachers are concerned. Especially in a foreign language-oriented university, there is still an invisible force stopping us to climb to the top, you know. Most of the full professors in the university are men. Some of my female colleagues, they would be satisfied once they win a title of associate professor, they think craving for the full professor is men's deeds. I don't know whether I would become one of them. This atmosphere sometimes frustrates me a lot (Interview A4).

The findings showed that Zoe manifested a strong sense of agency in her career development as a tertiary EFL teacher, which was featured in her iteration, projectivity, and practical evaluation. The findings also suggested that Zoe, as a female EFL teacher, displayed reflection and self-regulation during the whole process of achieving agency, which was found to be influenced by the social context, i.e. personal, inter-personal and organizational. Factors at different levels intertwined and helped shape Zoe's agency throughout her professional development.

Discussion

According to the above analyzed data, it is apparent that two perspectives relating to tertiary female EFL teachers' agency are unfold. On the one hand, female EFL teachers' agency is multi-layered and thus is manifested via different dimensions; on the other hand, the process how female EFL teachers achieve agency is dynamic and discursive, which is deeply rooted in their situated social context.

Based on the data, it is clear that female EFL teachers' agency is multi-dimensional, as what was found in the previous literature on teacher agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Biesta *et al.*, 2015). Previous studies have also demonstrated some common attributes in teachers who act with agency, such as intentionality (Giddens, 1984; Bandura, 2001), self-efficacy (Wheatley, 2005), will to act (Danielewicz, 2001), self-regulation (Bandura, 2001), etc., most of which are very similar in meaning and inclusive to each other. Hence, researchers further condensed these concepts, the commonly accepted one in academics are the chordal triad (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), claiming that teachers' acts with agency are manifested by iteration, projectivity and practical evaluation. The findings of this study have corresponded with this claim, yet, female EFL teachers at tertiary level, as a unique group in the society, who encounter their specific opportunities and challenges, are found to use reflection and self-regulation as facilitators to their professional agency. This has echoed with Archer (2007:1), who defined reflexivity as "the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa". His research on reflexivity offered a helpful heuristic in exploring the interplay between social conditioning and agential responses. What's more, the facilitating role of self-regulation was also clarified by Bandura (2001), in which he deemed it "a key factor in occupational life". To sum up, female EFL teachers cultivate multiple competencies to meet the ever-changing occupational demands and roles to achieve their agency in educational context. In my research, it can be suggested that with thinking, planning, acting and reflecting and self-regulating, Zoe succeeded in maneuvering her agency in her professional development. It is through constant engagement that Zoe mobilize her power to act and involve herself quite actively during the process.

It is also found that female EFL teachers' agency is context-dependent, and that it is the juxtaposition and interplay of multiple factors that helps shape and reshape their agency at personal level, interpersonal level and organizational level. This has reflected the ecological orientation of social act. A fundamental premise of the ecological approach to teacher agency is that agency is a situated achievement whereby actors act by means of their environment, rather than simply in it (Priestley *et al.*, 2005); their agency is achieved through 'the interplay of individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors' (Biesta & Tedder, 2007:137). The ecological perspective of teacher agency addresses the importance of considering individuals' capabilities to 'maneuver between repertoires' alongside social context and relationships that shape their particular ecologies, just as what was stressed by Duff (2012):

"a sense of agency enables people to imagine, take up, and perform new roles or identities and to take concrete actions in pursuit of their goals. Agency can also enable people to actively resist certain behaviors, practices, or positioning, sometimes leading to oppositional stances and behaviors leading to other identities. (p. 15)

This study also reveals that female tertiary EFL teachers have their own uniqueness in the paths of professional development, in which they have to negotiate and achieve balance between family life and

professional development. Schools have widely been described as ‘feminized’ environments, however, fewer females are found to be outstanding in their career (Moreau *et al.*, 2007). In this study, Zoe also encounters such prejudices and it is constant self-regulation and self-assurance that helps her to overcome the barriers and break through the given structure. Nowadays, social prejudice on females’ roles can still be hindrances for professional women to pursue a fulfilling and excellent performance at work. Female practitioners need to face up to but never succumb to the phenomenon.

By and large, the way how female EFL teachers achieve their agency is not one from the beginning to the end point; it is ongoing and dynamic. This study has presented some critical aspects concerning the interplay between social context and the opportunities and obstacles offered regarding a tertiary female EFL teachers’ exercise of agency in her identity negotiations and work.

4. Conclusion

This study adds to the current literature on teacher agency by demonstrating how a tertiary female EFL teacher recursively achieved her agency during professional development. It shows how teacher agency is afforded or constrained relative to certain context.

By applying a qualitative approach, this study offers a nuanced and intricate understanding of the issue, yet there are still some limitations. Small-scale qualitative studies raise the question of the extent to which the findings and conclusions can be transferred to other settings. We need additional examples of the discursive contours of teachers’ agency in various contexts. Then we might look across contexts to synthesize how agency makes sense to female tertiary EFL teachers. This study could also serve as the starting point for future quantitative studies, in which large-scale surveys will be conducted, so as to generate more generalized findings.

Despite its limitations, this study provides insights into possible perspectives of understanding agency of a tertiary female EFL teacher through practices and reflections in the educational context and shed some lights upon language teachers’ development so that they can become agentic professionals.

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Statement of authorship

The author has a responsibility for the conception and design of the study. The author has approved the final article.

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